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# *Impegno nero: Italian intellectuals and the African-American struggle*

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Charles L. Leavitt IV is a Lecturer in Italian Studies at the University of Reading. He studies modern Italian literature and cinema in a comparative context. Leavitt earned his PhD in Literature from the University of Notre Dame, where he was a Presidential Fellow in the Humanities, an Annese Fellow of the Nanovic Institute for European Studies, and a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Italian Studies. His work has appeared in the *Italianist*, *Modern Language Notes*, *Italian Culture*, the *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, and the *Italianist Film Issue*, of which he is a co-editor.

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**Abstract:**

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Italian intellectuals participated in Italy's reconstruction with an ideological commitment inspired by the African-American struggle for equal rights in the United States. Drawing on the work of many of the leading figures in postwar Italian culture, including Italo Calvino, Giorgio Caproni, Cesare Pavese, and Elio Vittorini, this essay argues that Italian intellectual *impegno*—defined as the effort to remake Italian culture and to guide Italian social reform—was united with a significant investment in the African-American cause. The author terms this tendency *impegno nero* and traces its development in the critical reception of African-American writers including W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. Postwar *impegno nero* is then contrasted with the treatment of African-American themes under Fascism, when commentators had likewise condemned American racism, but had paradoxically linked their laments for the plight of African Americans with defenses of the racial policies of the Fascist regime. Indeed, Fascist colonialism and anti-Semitism were both justified through references to what Fascist intellectuals believed to be America's greater injustices. After 1945, in contrast, Italian intellectuals advocated an international, interdependent campaign for justice, symbolizing national reforms by projecting them onto an emblematic America. In this way, *impegno nero* revived and revised the celebrated "myth of America" that had developed in Italy between the world wars. Advancing a new, postwar myth, Italian intellectuals adopted the African-American struggle in order to reinforce their own efforts in the ongoing struggle for justice in Italy.

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# *Impegno nero: Italian Intellectuals and the African-American Struggle*

Charles L. Leavitt IV

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Italian culture and society were reshaped by a prolonged, insistent, and profound engagement with the African-American struggle for freedom and equality. Inspired by rising black opposition to the racial injustices of the United States, prominent Italian intellectuals devoted themselves to the African-American cause, coupling their advocacy of racial equality abroad with their ongoing pursuit of social and political reform in Italy. They envisioned an international, interdependent campaign for justice, one in which Italy's prospects were contingent upon and inseparable from those of the United States. This united commitment to the battles for freedom and equality at home and abroad—a commitment founded upon notions of a common cause and a common front shared by African Americans and Italians—was a characteristic tendency of postwar Italian culture, one that I propose to call *impegno nero*.

A new coinage, *impegno nero* builds on and glosses received notions of Italian intellectual *impegno*, which I take to refer to the “exhortation that intellectuals work not just to clarify, but also to collaborate in, the construction of a new society” (“invito all’‘intellettuale’ perché la sua opera sia non soltanto chiarificatrice, ma anche collaboratrice nell’edificazione di una società nuova”), in the concise formulation of Eugenio Garin.<sup>1</sup> In its scope and objectives, *impegno* has often been interpreted as a primarily or even an exclusively national project. Thus it is generally understood that in the years of the anti-Fascist Resistance and the postwar reconstruction—the “years of *impegno*” (“anni dell’impegno”) as Norberto Bobbio terms them—intellectuals committed themselves to the cause of reclaiming Italy from Fascism and reforming Italian society and culture after the war.<sup>2</sup> And yet, *impegno* was always oriented internationally as well: even, and perhaps especially, after Fascism, Italian intellectuals from across the political spectrum understood their project as part of a worldwide reformation, drawing strength and stimulus from developments abroad as they sought to reimagine and to rebuild the nation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Garin, *Cronache di filosofia italiana, 1900-1960*, 2 vols. (Rome: Laterza, 1997), 493. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Italian are my own. While “[c]ommitment” and “engagement” are the principal equivalents in English” of *impegno*, as Jennifer Burns explains, it is also true that neither English term truly corresponds to the Italian, failing to “render the precise connotations and conditions of *impegno*,” as Alan O’Leary has argued. I therefore use “*impegno*” throughout the present essay to indicate the specific Italian discourse surrounding cultural politics. See Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Narrative, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern University Press, 2001), 5; Alan O’Leary, “Marco Tullio Giordana, or the Persistence of *Impegno*,” in *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture*, eds. Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 218. On *impegno* in Italy, see esp. David Ward, “Intellectuals, Culture and Power in Modern Italy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, eds. Zygmunt G. Barański and Rebecca West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 81-96; Robert S. C. Gordon, “*Impegno* and the encounter with modernity: ‘high’ culture in post-war Italy,” in *Italy since 1945*, ed. Patrick McCarthy (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 197-214.

<sup>2</sup> See the chapter “Gli anni dell’impegno” in Norberto Bobbio, *Profilo ideologico del Novecento* (Milan: Garzanti, 1993), 210-226.

<sup>3</sup> On the internationalism of anti-Fascist *impegno*, see, for instance, the anthology compiled by Massimo Scioscioli, Massimo Billi, and Giuliano Torlontano, *Europeismo repubblicano* (Rome: Archivio Trimestrale, 1984), esp. 57-152; the chapter on “The Legacy of Fascism: Redefining Italy After Mussolini,” in Robert A. Ventresca, *From*

*Impegno nero*, which inspired many of Italy's cultural leaders to unite their arguments for Italian social and cultural renewal with their condemnations of American racism, is a case in point. In fact, it may be the archetypal example. Italian intellectuals participated in Italy's reconstruction with an ideological commitment inspired, to a significant but heretofore underappreciated degree, by the African-American struggle for equal rights in the United States.

Endeavoring to anatomize and to historicize *impegno nero*, this essay unpacks a series of powerful analogies between Italy's social ills and America's racial dynamics, stressing the cultural and political implications of Italian intellectuals' engagement with the African-American experience. I argue that discussions of American shortcomings and American reforms conveyed covert and often overt allusions to Italy's postwar projects, and I suggest that Italy's intellectual leaders sought to symbolize local and national reforms by projecting them onto an emblematic America. The rhetoric of solidarity with the African-American cause thus came to constitute a new Italian "myth of America," an attempt to "discover America" within Italy by adapting the insights of American social critics in order to address the challenges facing Italian society after the war. Tracing the correlations between this new American mythology and its celebrated precedent, the Italian *mito dell'America* of the 1930s, I insist that both tendencies were characterized by their self-reflective hermeneutics, their desire to uncover the Italian connotations of every critical analysis of the American situation. It is this self-reflexivity, this self-critical approach to the fight for racial equality, that distinguishes *impegno nero* from Fascism's earlier criticisms of American racism, which were equally vigorous but far less rigorous, shaped as they were by a desire to vindicate rather than to interrogate Italian norms. Although prominent intellectuals loyal to the Fascist regime had condemned American racism and celebrated African-American culture, that is to say, they had done so while paradoxically accepting and even endorsing Italy's own Racial Laws and its colonial expansion in Africa. Betraying a selective moral outrage, they indicted American injustices and excused Italy's own unjust, racist policies. Postwar intellectuals sought instead to promote a more coherent program, uniting their critique of the United States with an uncompromising critique of Italian society. *Impegno nero* thus entailed the denunciation of injustices both at home and abroad: its proponents strove to present a united front and championed social reform in Italy as a necessary corollary and component of the ongoing struggle for reform in the United States.

Central to these efforts was the desire to uncover commonalities between the Italian and the American situations. *Impegno nero* thus relied on an instrumentalized interpretative methodology, one which led through analogy from an American precedent to a new Italian paradigm. In effect, then, *impegno nero* was a category of literary or cultural criticism, a mode of reading that sought to discover points of intersection between American texts and an Italian context. As such, it was both responsible for and dependent on the explosion of Italian interest in African-American writers after the Second World War. The five years that followed the war's conclusion saw Italian translations of major works of African-American literature including Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1947) and *Mulatto* (1949); Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1946); Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1947), *Native Son* (1947), and *Uncle Tom's Children* (1949); and Frank Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow* (1948).<sup>4</sup> In the same

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*Fascism to Democracy: Culture and Politics in the Italian Election of 1948* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 2004), 24-60; and Nicola Gallerano, "Il contesto internazionale," in *Il dopoguerra italiano, 1945/1948* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), 9-26.

<sup>4</sup> Langston Hughes, *Piccola America negra*, trans. Mario Monti (Milan: Longanesi, 1947); Langston Hughes, *Mulatto*, trans. Antonio Ghirelli (Milan: Mondadori, 1949); Zora Neale Hurston, *Mosè, uomo della montagna*, trans.

years, many of Italy's leading cultural journals, including *Il Politecnico* (1946), *Quaderni di poesia* (1946), *Oggi* (1946), *Società* (1946), *Sud* (1947), and *La Cittadella* (1947), published influential anthologies of African-American poetry.<sup>5</sup> These anthologies and editions, in turn, were accompanied by a number of literary histories that focused in whole or in part on African-American authors, including Virgilio Luciani's *Sette poeti negri* (1946), Leone Piccioni's *Letteratura dei negri d'America* (1949), Luigi Berti's *Canti negri* (1949), Carlo Izzo's *Poesia americana contemporanea e poesia negra* (1949), and Gabriele Baldini's *Poeti americani* (1949).<sup>6</sup> Introducing Italian readers to the African-American literary tradition as well as to the African-American struggle for equality, these texts, which proliferated after the war, were not only signs but also sites of *impegno nero*, and should be read and interpreted in this light. Despite the many important studies reconsidering the diffusion of African-American culture in Europe, however, there has as yet been no comprehensive investigation of African-American literature in Italy, nor of the cultural and political ties between African Americans and Italians.<sup>7</sup>

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Paolo Gobetti (Turin: Grassinelli, 1946); Richard Wright, *Ragazzo negro*, trans. Bruno Fonzi (Turin: Einaudi, 1947); Richard Wright, *Paura*, trans. Camillo Pellizzi (Milan: Bompiani, 1947); Richard Wright, *I figli dello zio Tom*, trans. Fernanda Pivano (Turin: Einaudi, 1949); Frank Yerby, *La superba creola*, trans. Fluffy Mella Mazzucato (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Italiano, 1948).

<sup>5</sup> *Il Politecnico* 29 (March 1, 1946) presented translations of Richard Wright, Melvin B. Tolson, and Langston Hughes. *Quaderni di poesia* 5 (1946) included poems by Sterling A. Brown, James Edwin Campbell, Countee Cullen, Waring Cuney, Frank Marshall Davis, Owen Dodson, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frances E. Harper, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and a selection of "Spirituals e Blues." Between May 14 and August 27 1946. *Oggi* presented translations of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. *Società* 2, no. 6 (1946) and *Sud* 2, no. 1 (January 1947) focused on the work of Langston Hughes. *La Cittadella* 2, nos. 19-20 (October 15-30, 1947) included translations of poems by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Claude McKay.

<sup>6</sup> Virgilio Luciani, *Sette poeti negri* (Modena: Berben, 1946); Leone Piccioni, *Letteratura dei negri d'America* (Milan: Accademia, 1949); Luigi Berti, *Canti negri* (Florence: Fussi, 1949); Carlo Izzo, *Poesia americana contemporanea e poesia negra* (Parma: Guanda, 1949); Gabriele Baldini, *Poeti americani [1662-1945]* (Turin: Francesco De Silva, 1949). For a more complete bibliography tracing the diffusion of African-American culture in Italy, see Stefania Piccinato, "La letteratura afro-americana in Italia – 1900-1975 – Bibliografia," in *Saggi sulla cultura afro-americana*, ed. Alessandro Portelli (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1979), 337-90.

<sup>7</sup> On African-American culture and its relationship to Europe, see Michel Fabre, *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Malgorzata Irek, *The European Roots of the Harlem Renaissance* (Berlin: John F. Kennedy Institut für Nordamerikastudien, 1994); Robert Coles, *Black Writers Abroad: A Study of Black American Writers in Europe and Africa* (New York: Garland, 1999); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2003); *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004); and Tania Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2008). There are also numerous Italian studies of African-American culture, including Piero Boitani, *Prosatori negri americani del Novecento* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1973); Giuseppina Corgese, *Letteratura e coscienza nera. Gli scrittori afroamericani del Novecento* (Milan: Mursia, 1973); Loretta Valtz Mannucci, *I negri americani dalla depressione al dopoguerra. Esperienze sociali e documenti letterari* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974); Alessandro Portelli, *La linea del colore. Saggi sulla cultura afroamericana* (Rome: Manifesto Libri, 1994); Rossella Giangrande, *Il riscatto del tribale come liberazione dal profondo. Saggi sulla narrativa femminile afro-americana* (Lecce: Milella, 1998); and Giulia Fabi, *America nera: la cultura afroamericana* (Rome: Carocci, 2002). However, these works do not seek to analyze the Italian reception of or relationship to African-American literature, while comparative studies of African-American culture in Europe tend to devote relatively little attention to Italy. The most thorough analysis of the representation of African Americans remains that of Chandra M. Harris, *Who's Got the Power? Blacks in Italian Cinema and Literature, 1910-1948* (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2004).

It is time to reassess the Italian engagement with African-American literature and the struggle for Civil Rights in the aftermath of the Second World War, a period Gian Carlo Testoni justifiably described in 1946 as “the Negro moment” (“l’ora negra”) in Italian culture.<sup>8</sup> Indications of Italy’s growing interest in and respect for African-American culture were pervasive in the early postwar period. Leone Piccioni argued in a 1947 essay that, in all of American culture, “the greatest originality, the greatest innovation in the relationship between men, is to be found in the participation of the Negroes” (“la massima originalità [...], la massima novità dei rapporti tra gli uomini, sta nella presenza dei negri”), and in the same year Giuseppe Ravasio declared African-American literature to be “of the utmost importance” (“di primissima importanza”), while Vinicio Marinucci suggested that African-American writers “have achieved a height of expression equal to that reached by populations with far more ancient traditions” (“hanno raggiunto espressioni di un’altezza pari a quella toccata da altri popoli di assai più antica tradizione”).<sup>9</sup> The following year, Geri Morra proclaimed that “Negroes have entered into world literature” (“[i] negri [...] sono entrati nella letteratura mondiale”), Gigi Cane declared African-American music, poetry, narrative, and theater to have contributed “some of the few genuinely original motifs of the young American culture” (“fra i pochi motivi genuinamente originali della giovane cultura americana”), and Alberto Savinio stressed “the importance that Negro *culture* has had and is having in the culture of our time” (“l’importanza che la *cultura* negra ha avuto e sta avendo nella cultura del nostro tempo”).<sup>10</sup> In 1949, as admiration for African-American literature spread throughout Italy—cresting like a “wave that washed over our shores with the Allied occupation” (“ondata che si riversò sulle nostre rive con l’occupazione alleata”), in the words of Domenico De Robertis—Domenico Mauriello was led to exclaim that “Negro poetry and literature are conquering the sympathy and the interest of the European public” (“[l]a poesia e la letteratura negre vanno di più conquistando le simpatie e l’interesse del pubblico europeo”), Francesco Valori argued that “a history of American literature cannot be considered complete if it does not also consider ‘colored’ writers” (“una storia letteraria americana non può essere completa se non tratta anche degli scrittori ‘colorati’”), and Roberto Leydi concluded that “the originality of American poetry is principally the result of the anonymous contributions of the Negroes” (“[l]’originalità della poesia americana è principalmente affidata alla produzione anonima dei negri”).<sup>11</sup> It is little wonder, then, that Giovanni Battista Angioletti was inspired to affirm in the same year that “the social condition of the American Negroes is, you might say, one of the rallying cries of postwar *engagée* literature” (“[l]a condizione sociale dei negri d’America è, si può dire, uno dei cavalli di battaglia della letteratura *engagée* del dopoguerra”).<sup>12</sup> Identifying the political *engagement* that stood behind the growing Italian interest in the life and culture of blacks in the United States, Angioletti made

<sup>8</sup> Gian Carlo Testoni, “L’ora negra,” *La lettura* 2, no. 33 (August 17, 1946): 13.

<sup>9</sup> Leone Piccioni, “La cultura in America non è di un solo colore,” *La Fiera letteraria*, June 12, 1947, 6; Giuseppe Ravasio, “Poesia negra americana,” *La Cittadella* 2, nos. 19-20 (October 15-30, 1947): 4; Vinicio Marinucci, “Tutti i figli di Dio hanno le ali. Il teatro negro è entrato nella storia delle arti,” *Il Dramma* 29 (January 15, 1947): 59.

<sup>10</sup> Geri Morra, “Valori di religione nella poesia negra,” *Ausonia* 26 (August 1948): 25; Gigi Cane, “Anch’io sono l’America. Il teatro negro,” *Il Dramma* 52 (January 2, 1948): 35; Alberto Savinio, “Pianista negro,” originally in *Corriere d’informazione*, December 7-8, 1948, now in *Scritti dispersi 1943-1952*, ed. Paola Italia (Milan: Adelphi, 2004), 970.

<sup>11</sup> Domenico De Robertis, “Poesia negra americana,” *La Fiera letteraria*, October 9, 1949, 2; Domenico Mauriello, Review of *Sette poeti negri*, by Virgilio Luciani. *Pagine nuove* 3 (June-July 1949): 352; Francesco Valori, “Letteratura negra in America,” *Idea* (August 7-14, 1949): 8; Roberto Leydi, “Poesia negra a poesia americana,” *Avanti!* November 13, 1949, 3.

<sup>12</sup> G.B. Angioletti, “L’America negra,” *Il Mondo*, October 22-29, 1949, 9.



apparent that the increased attention paid to black writers and intellectuals in Europe had distinct political implications, and he suggested, for this reason, that it should be interpreted within a framework central to developing notions of intellectual *impegno*.

Angioletti recognized that, in their readings of African-American literature and in their condemnations of America's racial politics, the *intellettuali impegnati* were commenting upon and intervening in a European as well as an American cause. They were not only scrutinizing the situation of blacks in the United States, but drawing on it purposefully in order to advance a political argument in Italy. That political argument was often subtle, at times implicit and rarely transparent, but it was forceful nevertheless, and remarkably substantial. It served both to emphasize the shared pathos of the Italian and African-American experiences and to underline what many believed to be the shared objectives of black and Italian activists. Italians were already quite familiar with the plight of African Americans, particularly those in the Jim Crow South: it was "a well-known story" ("una storia che ben conosciamo"), as Cesare Pavese remarked in 1947.<sup>13</sup> Comparing the fate of Italians after the war to that of blacks in the United States was for this reason unquestionably confrontational, a clear attempt to provoke Italians, to force them to recognize the depredations of Fascism and the difficulties of reconstruction. At the same time, such comparisons sought not only to motivate social reform in Italy, but also to interest Italians in the campaign for racial equality in the United States. Describing the African-American resistance to oppression in a language borrowed from the Italian Risorgimento and the anti-Fascist Resistance, Italy's intellectual leaders indicated that a common moral imperative, a shared compulsion for justice, united the two peoples.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it was often suggested that African Americans were reprising the Italian struggle for liberation and self determination, and Domenico Porzio spoke for many when he declared that plantation songs, spirituals, and the blues were signs that blacks were pursuing their own "Garibaldian freedom" ("garibaldina libertà").<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, then, what such comparisons were intended to suggest was that blacks and Italians were faced with comparable inequities and should therefore work together to achieve their common ambitions.

It was this sense of shared struggle, for instance, that gave to Italo Calvino's resonant 1947 review of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* its underlying ethical and political charge. Inspired by the recent Italian translation of Wright's autobiography, which traced the celebrated African-American intellectual's social formation in the Jim Crow South, Calvino reflected on the revolutionary role of black culture. He argued that, dramatizing the author's increasing opposition to injustice, *Black Boy* stood at the vanguard of the "history of a culture that, from a culture of consolation, has become a cultural weapon of defense and of conquest" ("[s]toria di una cultura che da cultura come consolazione, diventa cultura come arma di difesa e di

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<sup>13</sup> Cesare Pavese, "Richard Wright," originally "Un negro ci parla," radio broadcast in May 1947. Now in *La letteratura americana e altri saggi* (Turin: Einaudi, 1992), 171.

<sup>14</sup> Two studies have noted the rhetorical ties to Italy's anti-Fascist Resistance in the postwar Italian critical response to African-American literature. Stefania Piccinato has argued that this connection "è proprio nella sutura tra esperienza resistenziale (europea) e riconoscimento di una esperienza consimile della minoranza afro-americana" (Stefania Piccinato, "La letteratura afro-americana," 339-40). More recently, Simone Francescato has made the case that "una generazione di intellettuali antifascisti [...] pone l'accento sulle rivendicazioni dei poeti afroamericani. Delle loro opere viene enfatizzato l'aspetto della resistenza, cioè la rappresentazione di un popolo oppresso ma deciso a non lasciarsi sconfiggere, in sintonia con il clima di repressione intellettuale dell'Italia fascista e del secondo dopoguerra" (Simone Francescato, "Le prime traduzioni italiane della poesia afroamericana: il caso di Langston Hughes," in *Parlare di razza. La lingua del colore tra Italia e Stati Uniti*, eds. Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Anna Scacchi [Verona: Ombre Corte, 2012], 187).

<sup>15</sup> Domenico Porzio, "Sulle acque del Mississippi è nata una nuova poesia," *Oggi*, September 15, 1949, 37.

conquista”).<sup>16</sup> It is unlikely that his readers would have missed the clear echoes in this statement of Elio Vittorini’s celebrated 1945 call for a new culture in Italy, his “endeavor to give rise to a new culture that would promote the defense rather than the consolation of humanity” (“tentativo di far sorgere una nuova cultura che sia di difesa e non più di consolazione dell’uomo”).<sup>17</sup> Calvino’s appropriation of Vittorini’s terms, underlined by his emphasis on the transition from “consolation” to “defense,” is hardly coincidental. It is evidence, in fact, of his attempt to present African-American culture as a prominent part of a transnational struggle for social renewal. Identifying in Wright, and in African-American culture more broadly, “the emergence of a literature that [...] represents [...] the rejection of acquiescence and of nostalgia, one which locates its struggle within the context of the great social conflicts” (“il sorgere di una letteratura, che [...] rappresenta [...] l’abbandono della rassegnazione e della nostalgia per una concezione di lotta nel quadro dei grandi conflitti sociali”), and reinforcing this identification by linking it to Vittorini’s essay, perhaps the best-known statement of postwar Italian *impegno*, Calvino was implying that, like Italy’s own “new culture,” the work of black American writers was central to the global struggle for justice in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>18</sup>

While Calvino emphasized common outcomes, implying that blacks and Italians were pursuing similar goals, many Italian intellectuals put the stress instead on common enemies, arguing that they were fighting against similar forms of oppression and even against a common foe. The theater critic Leonida Rèpaci was among the many to make this case, linking America’s nascent Civil Rights battles to Italy’s ongoing economic reforms in two reviews of the Teatro Pirandello’s 1950 production of Arnaud d’Usseau and James Gow’s play *Deep Are the Roots*. The story of a black American soldier’s fraught return to the segregated South after the completion of his tour of duty in the Second World War, *Deep Are the Roots* revealed to Rèpaci several disturbing parallels between racial oppression in the United States and class-based oppression in Italy. As he saw it, “there is not [...] much difference between the plantation owners in the southern United States and the barons in Calabria” (“non c’è [...] molta differenza tra i terrieri delle regioni meridionali degli Stati Uniti e i baroni calabresi”). For Rèpaci, that is to say, the *latifondisti* in the Italian South were comparable to the white landowners in the American South, and peasant laborers in the Italian *mezzogiorno* were akin to black sharecroppers in the Jim Crow United States. In its dramatic representation of American injustices, therefore, *Deep Are the Roots* could afford new insights into the Italian situation, and Rèpaci sought to underline these insights in his review. Interpreting the play as the sign of a tactical shift in the fight against capitalist exploitation, Rèpaci declared that workers of all races were beginning to recognize that one obstacle, one antagonist stood in their way, and were finally working together against the prevailing social order. As he wrote in his review, “the ‘poor whites’ have understood that their ultimate liberation, in America and worldwide, depends on the solidarity of all of the exploited peoples, white, black and yellow, against the common enemy, against global capitalism” (“il ‘povero bianco’ ha capito che il suo affrancamento totale, in America e in tutto il mondo, dipende dalla solidarietà di tutti gli sfruttati della terra, bianchi, neri

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<sup>16</sup> Italo Calvino, “*Ragazzo negro* di Richard Wright,” originally in *L’Unità*, May 8, 1947, now in *Saggi 1945-1985*, 2 vols., ed. Mario Barenghi (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), Vol. 1, 1463.

<sup>17</sup> Elio Vittorini, “Una nuova cultura,” originally in *Il Politecnico* 1, no. 1 (September 29, 1945), now in Elio Vittorini, *Letteratura arte società. Articoli e interventi 1938-1965*, ed. Raffaella Rodondi (Turin: Einaudi, 2008), 236.

<sup>18</sup> Italo Calvino, “*Ragazzo negro* di Richard Wright,” 1463.

e gialli, contro il nemico comune, contro il capitalismo mondiale”).<sup>19</sup> To Rèpaci, in other words, what the play made clear was that shared suffering necessitated a shared struggle. In order to end their collective oppression, blacks and poor Italians would need to join forces against their common oppressor.

While Gow and d’Usseau’s play provided the occasion for his reflections on the African-American situation and its relevance to postwar Italy, Rèpaci made clear that his outlook, especially in regard to the affiliation of race and class, was more ideological than situational. Rèpaci’s interpretation of *Deep Are the Roots*, that is to say, revealed its origins in his Marxist understanding of institutional racism, and in particular in the Soviet adoption of that Marxist paradigm for the analysis of mid-century American politics. Rèpaci found in the play confirmation of a view of the United States that he had first encountered in the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg’s account of his American travels, published in Italian translation in 1947, and that he had subsequently corroborated at the 1948 meeting of the World Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in Wroclaw, Poland, a Soviet-backed gathering intended to galvanize world opinion against American military ambitions.<sup>20</sup> Reflecting its Cold-War objectives, the Wroclaw peace conference presented strident critiques not only of American foreign policy, which many of the delegates viewed as the primary threat to world peace, but also of American racism, which many saw as ancillary to capitalist exploitation. Rèpaci recalled, in fact, that among the speeches at the conference there was a forceful “indictment delivered [...] by the Negro delegates” (“atto di accusa pronunciato [...] dai delegati negri”), which was received with

visible commotion by the Assembly, which rose to its feet, an homage that even included the American progressives, who bowed unanimously, acknowledging in this way their own responsibility for the system of racial slavery enacted by the plantation owners of the South. For them, the Negro, whatever he does, even if he covers himself in medals earned in war, is in peacetime allowed only to multiply the riches of his masters; he remains, in this way, an abject being, valued only for the total exploitation of the force of his labor.

vivissima commozione dall’Assemblea in piedi, e, all’omaggio si inchinarono unanimi anche i delegati americani progressisti, i quali così intendevano dividere le loro responsabilità dallo schiavismo razziale dei piantatori del Sud. Per costoro, il negro, qualunque cosa faccia, si copra di medaglie in guerra, serva in pace a

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<sup>19</sup> Leonida Rèpaci, “Profonde sono le radici,” originally in *Vie Nuove*, January 1950, now in Leonida Rèpaci, *Teatro di ogni tempo* (Milan: Casa Editrice Ceschina), 1967, 749. See also Leonida Rèpaci, “Al teatro Pirandello la critica la fa il popolo,” originally in *Vie Nuove*, January 1950, now in *Teatro di ogni tempo*, 742-745.

<sup>20</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, *America* (Florence: Macchia, 1947). The Wroclaw conference brought together Soviet and Western intellectuals including Bertolt Brecht, Aimé Césaire, Ilya Ehrenburg, Paul Éluard, Alexander Fadeyev, György Lukács, and Pablo Picasso, as well an Italian delegation that included, in addition to Rèpaci, Antonio Banfi, Renato Guttuso, Salvatore Quasimodo, and Elio Vittorini. See Lawrence S. Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement Through 1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 175-177; and *Il congresso di Wroclaw: la cultura per la pace* (Rome: Tipo litografia Artero, 1948).

moltiplicare le ricchezze dei suoi padroni, resta un essere abietto buono soltanto per lo sfruttamento intensivo della sua forza-lavoro.<sup>21</sup>

That Rèpaci would cite this report in his review of *Deep Are the Roots* is telling. It is telling, too, that in his summary of the delegates' denunciation of racism, Rèpaci insisted on its implications for the class struggle, deploring the economic exploitation of African Americans, whose forced subordination served to deepen class divisions in the United States by subsidizing whites and ensuring the proletarianization of blacks. Analyzing Gow and d'Usseau's play and its indictment of American racism in this way, Rèpaci was unmistakably adopting the Soviet line, in which opposition to racial exploitation in America was one aspect of a larger campaign against global economic exploitation, one front in the battle for Communism worldwide.<sup>22</sup>

Institutional racism in the United States, in fact, had long been a focus of Soviet attention. Not only had Lenin addressed the so-called "Negro Question" at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, but the Fourth Congress, in 1922, had led to the formation of a Negro Commission in order to encourage the global struggle against racism within the larger struggle against capitalism. The Commission's "Theses on the Negro Question" declared that racial oppression was a form of economic oppression and called for African Americans to supplant their notions of racial solidarity with class-consciousness, taking up the fight for international Communism.<sup>23</sup> At its core, their argument was that American institutional racism conspired to keep blacks in a position of inferiority both socially and economically, and thus to ensure the continued presence of a class below that of the poorest whites. In this way, racism effectively purchased white support for capitalism, providing even the poorest of white citizens with "a sort of public and psychological wage," as W. E. B. DuBois argued, granting them social if not economic advantages over blacks and thereby allowing them to feel part of the ruling class even when they remained decidedly working class. Thus, it was believed, poor whites were led to align themselves with the wealthy in what Joel Olson calls "a *cross-class alliance* between the capitalist class and a section of the working class" rather than uniting with African-Americans in the sort of *cross-race alliance* through which they might more effectively pursue economic equality.<sup>24</sup> In this interpretation, racism ultimately served to perpetuate capitalism. Many

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<sup>21</sup> Leonida Rèpaci, "Profonde sono le radici," 746-747.

<sup>22</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Alexander DeConde, *Ethnicity, Race, and American Foreign Policy: A History* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992); Paul Gordon Lauren, *Power and Prejudice: The Politics and Diplomacy of Racial Discrimination* (Boulder: Westview, 1988).

<sup>23</sup> Cedric J. Benson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 219-223; Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class in Conflict 1919-1990* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 48. See also Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: Atheneum, 1995 [1935]), 700-701; Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 16. Both of these statements are quoted and discussed in David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 50. Many scholars continue to hold to this view, employing what Michael Reich calls "a class conflict interpretation of the history of race relations" and arguing that racism was an outgrowth of economic competition and even an instrument for maintaining economic inequality. They contend,

believed, therefore, that to combat racism one needed to instill class consciousness in blacks and poor whites, to help them recognize their common enemies and their common ambitions, and, in the words of Leonida Rèpaci, to promote the “solidarity of all of the exploited peoples.” Rèpaci’s particular contribution to this tendency lay in his claim that, as an oppressed underclass, African Americans bore a particular resemblance to poor southern Italians, and therefore that it was the duty and destiny of all Italians to unite with the blacks in their fight for equality. This claim, then, imbued his vision of “solidarity,” his *impegno nero*, with a national as well as an international resonance.

Not only Rèpaci, but in fact many prominent Italian intellectuals espoused such a view, framing America’s racial conflict as a class conflict and calling for a cross-racial class consciousness in order to foment a global, as well as a specifically Italian, resistance movement. Among the most forceful advocates of this position was Giuseppe Del Bo, who argued in a 1948 essay in *Avanti!*, provocatively entitled “Dinamite negra” (“Black Dynamite”), that African Americans represented the vanguard in a struggle for justice that was European as well as American, and that the emerging black resistance could thus serve to explode the European consensus and to overturn the prevailing political order worldwide. “The Negroes have by now clearly identified the cause of their moral and material misfortune, and have gone on the offensive” (“[I] negri, hanno ormai chiaramente individuato le cause della loro miseria morale e materiale, e sono passati all’offensiva”), Del Bo explained, while

[i]n Europe, [...] instead of a race, we have a class that is kept in a position of inferiority, and we know well how similar its general psychosis is to that identified in Negroes. And yet the moment always arises when a man of the race or the class that is considered inferior asks himself: ‘Why must I serve while they are served? Why am I poor and they are rich?’

[i]n Europa [...] invece di una razza, abbiamo una classe mantenuta in uno stato di inferiorità, e sappiamo bene come la sua psicosi generale sia simile a quella descritta a proposito dei negri. Eppure giunge sempre il momento in cui un uomo della razza o della classe considerate inferiori, si chiede: ‘Perché io devo servire e loro sono serviti? Perché io sono povero e loro sono ricchi?’<sup>25</sup>

Not only were blacks in the United States and workers in Europe both victims of oppression and exploitation, Del Bo was arguing, they were also both increasingly outspoken in their opposition to that exploitation, and they could therefore help to reinforce each other’s efforts to overturn the systems of oppression. Suggesting that black resistance to racism could prefigure, and parallel,

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as Bill Fletcher Jr. has argued, that in the United States there has been an “obscuring of class by race,” that “[c]lass contradictions in the U.S.” were (and are) “defined largely in the context of race and settlerism.” Michael Reich, *Racial Inequality: A Political-Economic Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 218; Bill Fletcher Jr., “How Race Enters Class in the United States,” in *What’s Class Got To Do With It? American Society in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Michael Zweig (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 38, 40. Examples include Joseph Gerteis, *Class and the Color Line: Interracial Class Coalition in the Knights of Labor and the Populist Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Giuseppe Del Bo, “Dinamite negra,” *Avanti!*, January 29, 1948, 3.

European resistance to capitalism, in other words, Del Bo was proposing the fight for racial equality in the United States as a trigger for a worldwide workers' revolution, expressing his hope that European workers might follow the African-American lead and begin to emerge from the "position of inferiority" in which they had been kept. The *impegno nero* made manifest in Del Bo's essay, as in Rèpaci's reviews, is perhaps best understood, therefore, as a prominent Italian example of a broader European tendency, one which drew inspiration from Marxist principles and Soviet strategy and incorporated Italian and African-American reform movements within a global framework.

While this ideological backdrop undoubtedly helped to shape the Italian reception of black culture, it is nonetheless evident that the rhetoric of *impegno nero* owed at least as much to the domestic politics and local experiences of wartime and postwar Italy as it did to such international developments. One crucial factor in shaping Italians' unique engagement with the African-American struggle, for example, was the presence in Italy of large numbers of black soldiers both during and after the war. It was in Italy, after all, that the celebrated Buffalo Division of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry was deployed, becoming the first black unit to fight in Europe when they landed in Naples in July 1944.<sup>26</sup> Many of these soldiers remained in Italy during the postwar occupation, and the interchanges and associations prompted by the resulting close contact between African-Americans and Italians were frequently instructive, helping to spread cultural understanding and to reinforce political sympathies. For instance, Arrigo Benedetti, who would go on to launch the influential journals *L'Europeo* and *Espresso*, reported on a 1945 dinner he shared with soldiers of the Buffalo Division, where he was first introduced to Negro spirituals.<sup>27</sup> A seemingly minor episode, perhaps, but such exchanges helped both to popularize African-American music and literature and to familiarize Italians with African-American social concerns. Their impact was apparent to Walter White, future head of the NAACP, who spent parts of 1944 and 1945 touring Italy as a war correspondent for the *New York Post*, and who was continually struck by Italians' warm reception of the black soldiers. Many in Italy, White recalled, "learned from firsthand acquaintance that among the Negro soldiers were men of culture and education." Moreover, since these soldiers often went out of their way to provide impoverished Italians with food, in White's telling, this "inevitably created an inordinate amount of good will for the Negro benefactors and for Negroes generally among the recipients of their benefactions."<sup>28</sup> Gratitude for the assistance of black soldiers, White made clear, went hand in hand with an appreciation of black culture, an awareness of the fraught racial dynamics of American society, and increasing support for African Americans in their campaign for justice.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, *impegno nero* was often explicitly framed as a result of and response to the spirit of "good will" that White identified. This is apparent, for example, in the reflections of the poet Giorgio Caproni, whose 1949 essay "I negri sono uomini" ("The Negroes are Men") recalls the arrival of African-American soldiers in Italy and asserts that blacks and Italians had met each other with "mutual enthusiasm" ("reciproca esaltazione"). This appreciative reception, Caproni explained, "[w]as, in its abjection, a manifestation of love, (of *offended people* drawn towards other *offended people*, with shared wonder, and for this reason we Italians are now attempting to understand our brothers of a different color in a more worthy

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<sup>26</sup> Hordon B. Hargrove, *Buffalo Soldiers in Italy: Black Americans in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003), 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> Arrigo Benedetti, "Litografie del tempo presente. Negri in Toscana," *La città libera* 1, no. 43 (December 6, 1945): 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc. 1945), 99-101.

fashion” (“[f]u un fenomeno, nella sua abiezione, di ‘amore’, [di *offesi* mossi verso altri *offesi*, con reciproco abbaglio], e anche per questo cerchiamo ora, noi italiani, di conoscere in modo degno questi nostri fratelli di differente colore”).<sup>29</sup> That is to say, Caproni maintained that the new and profound Italian interest in African-American culture resulted from the relationships formed between blacks and Italians in wartime. Moreover, he stressed that those relationships carried with them a social obligation, arguing that Italians were duty-bound to support African Americans in their struggle for Civil Rights just as they themselves had been supported by African Americans in the fight against Fascism. In Caproni’s words, encountering black soldiers amidst the rubble of the Second World War the Italians were “*offended people* drawn towards other *offended people*,” victims united with other victims: cognizant of their own misfortunes, they were sensitive to the misfortunes of African Americans. While Italy’s fortunes were changing, moreover, the plight of African Americans was ongoing. Black soldiers had freed Italians from Fascist oppression, but they themselves remained oppressed, and mired in their own bloody battle for freedom. Caproni thus insisted that Italians should seek to contribute to the struggle against racism in the United States just as African Americans had contributed to the struggle against Fascism in Italy. As Caproni envisioned it, then, *impegno nero* necessarily followed from the encounter with black soldiers in Italy, which both precipitated the postwar Italian dissemination of African-American culture and committed Italians to the fight for racial equality in the United States.

If *impegno nero* was partly the result of wartime interactions, however, it was also the outgrowth of prewar convictions. While the increasing popularity of African-American literature after the war was certainly precipitous, in other words, it was by no means spontaneous. The efforts of some of Italy’s leading young interwar intellectuals had prepared the ground on which the new culture would grow after 1945. Indeed, *impegno nero* is unimaginable, and largely incomprehensible, without the profound investment in American literature that had characterized the previous two decades of Italian culture. This is because *impegno nero* effectively revived and revised the *mito dell’America* that Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, and the other young Italian intellectuals often collectively called the *americanisti* had helped to develop between the World Wars.<sup>30</sup> This American mythology, which coalesced around Vittorini’s monumental 1941

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<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Caproni, “I negri sono uomini,” *Mondo Operaio* 2, no. 35 (July 23, 1949): 8.

<sup>30</sup> On Italy’s “*mito dell’America*,” see Donald Heiney, *America in Modern Italian Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964); Dominique Fernandez, *Il mito dell’America negli intellettuali italiani dal 1930 al 1950*, trans. Alfonso Zaccaria (Rome: Salvatore Sciascia Editore, 1969); Nicola Carducci, *Gli intellettuali italiani e l’ideologia americana nell’Italia letteraria degli anni trenta* (Manduria: Piero Lacaita editore, 1973); Giuseppe Massara, *Americani. L’immagine letteraria degli Stati Uniti in Italia* (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1984); Giorgio Luti, “Immagini dell’America nella letteratura italiana degli anni Trenta,” in *Studi di filologia e letteratura italiana in onore di Gianvito Resta*, 2 vols., ed. Vitilio Masiello (Rome: Salerno Editrice, 2000), Vol. 2, 1277-1295; Valerio Ferme, *Tradurre è tradire: La traduzione come sovversione culturale sotto il Fascismo* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2002); the chapter on “The Myth of America” in Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map for Postwar Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 79-115; Jane Dunnett, “Anti-Fascism and Literary Criticism in Postwar Italy: Revisiting the *mito americano*,” in *Culture, Censorship and the State in Twentieth-Century Italy*, eds. Guido Bonsaver and Robert S. C. Gordon (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), 109-19; Mario Domenichelli, “Il mito americano in Italia fra gli anni Trenta e gli anni Cinquanta e *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* di Italo Calvino,” in *La coscienza e il coraggio. Esperienze letterarie della modernità. Studi in onore di Sandro Maxia*, ed. Giovanna Caltagirone (Cagliari: AM&D, 2005), 690-714; Francesco Pontuale, *In Their Own Terms: American Literary Historiography in the United States and Italy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 127- 52; Claudio Antonelli, *Pavese, Vittorini e gli americanisti: Il mito dell’America* (Florence: Edarc Edizioni, 2008); Fabio Ferrari, *Myths and Counter-Myths of America: New World Allegories in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Italian Literature and Film* (Ravenna: Longo

anthology *Americana*, presented American literature as a means not only to renew Italian literature but also to renew Italy itself.<sup>31</sup> Like the advocates of *impegno nero*, in other words, Vittorini, Pavese and the *americanisti* conjoined their political convictions with their cultural interests. Translating and celebrating American literature during the Fascist *ventennio*, they opposed the prevailing tendencies in Italian culture and imagined an American alternative. If a commitment to the fight against racism and the concomitant diffusion of African-American literature was a characteristic form of postwar *impegno nero*, then the commitment to the fight against Fascism and the concomitant adoption of American realist literature was similarly a characteristic form of interwar *impegno*.

As such, the *mito dell'America* of the 1930s provides needed perspective on *impegno nero* and its characteristic investment in African-American and Italian social issues. Primarily, I believe, what both tendencies share is their self-reflective modes of interpretation, their use of analogy and even allegory to couch their rhetoric of *impegno* in transnational rather than exclusively local social critiques. *Impegno nero* emphasized the Italian connotations of the African-American struggle just as the *mito dell'America* emphasized the Italian connotations of American social realism. In both cases, those connotations derived from a specific set of approaches to the text. That is to say, both the pre- and the postwar tendencies were defined by their appropriation of a reformist ideology and rhetoric that had originated in American literature, and this appropriation was arrived at by establishing correspondences between American and Italian social conditions. Re-contextualization and re-interpretation were thus crucial steps in both political operations. Yet, especially in the case of the *mito dell'America*, this fact has often been overlooked. The Fascist government's official policy of cultural autarky and its increasingly bellicose attitude toward the United States led many to suggest that the translation and dissemination of American literature under Fascism was an *inherently* political act, as if the very introduction of American writers into the Italian context was an act of defiance, a mode of dissent. Scholars have now largely rejected this interpretation as a "comforting illusion" or a "historical distortion."<sup>32</sup> Having ceased to draw rigid distinctions between the anti-Americanism of Fascist intellectuals and the anti-Fascism of the *americanisti*, historians now stress the ambivalent image of America in Fascist Italy, noting that even some of those closest to

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Editore, 2008); and Nicola Turi, *Declinazioni del canone americano in Italia tra gli anni Quaranta e Sessanta* (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Elio Vittorini, ed., *Americana. Raccolta di narratori dalle origini ai nostri giorni* (Milan: Bompiani, 1941). On *Americana*, see Sergio Pautasso, "Quando si amava l'America. Conversazione con Valentino Bompiani, Oreste Del Buono e Claudio Gorlier," *La Fiera letteraria*, December 19, 1968, 16-18; Giuliano Manacorda, "Come fu pubblicata 'Americana,'" in Elio Vittorini, *Atti del convegno nazionale di studi (Siracusa-Noto, 12-13 febbraio 1976)*, eds. Paolo Mario Sipala and Ermanno Scuderi (Catania: Greco, 1978), 63-68; Gabriella D'Ina and Giuseppe Zaccaria, eds., *Caro Bompiani. Lettere con l'editore* (Milan: Bompiani, 1988), 38-46; Marina Guglielmi, "La letteratura americana tradotta in Italia nel decennio 1930-1940: Vittorini e l'antologia *Americana*," *Forum Italicum* 29, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 301-312; Alessandra Rocca, "I miti del Nuovo Continente: l'*Americana* di Vittorini," *Quaderni del '900* 2 (2002): 111-127.

<sup>32</sup> Tim Parks, "Stop it and Act," *The London Review of Books* 32, no. 3 (11 Feb. 2010): 7; Jane Dunnett, "Anti-Fascism and Literary Criticism in Postwar Italy," 115. The most comprehensive critique of the traditional account of the *mito dell'America* is that offered by Fabio Ferrari, who believes that scholarship's "historical oversimplifications [...] retrospectively politicize a literary phenomenon," a statement that I believe takes too far the justifiable skepticism regarding the supposedly inherent political message of American translations under Fascism. Despite Ferrari's claim, I remain convinced that the myth of America represented more than "an *entirely* apolitical literary interest" even when it was not overtly or consistently opposed to the Fascist regime. Fabio Ferrari, *Myths and Counter-Myths of America*, 71, 83 (emphasis mine).



the Mussolini regime celebrated American culture while, on the contrary, some of those opposed to the regime also at times opposed America's cultural and political influence.<sup>33</sup> For this and other reasons, translations of American literature were rarely censored and were in fact frequently seen, and made, to conform to Fascism's own cultural project. One could not portray Italians negatively, for example, or offend "Fascist morality," and, as Francesca Billiani explains, "foreign texts had always to be compared with the example set by the canonical Italian literary tradition." Within these limits, however, translation was encouraged, becoming so prevalent that, measured in numbers of pages, foreign translations outstripped Italian texts in Fascist Italy.<sup>34</sup> The act of translation did not, therefore, in and of itself, constitute an act of opposition, nor did the idealization of America necessarily imply or entail a condemnation of Fascism.

It is certainly true that Vittorini and Pavese's translations of American literature were adopted by generations of left-wing intellectuals, both because they were believed to have constituted an intervention against Fascist ideology and because they served to motivate many of their readers to engage in further acts of opposition. It is also true, however, that translation itself cannot account for the political significance of the *mito dell'America*. Instead, the myth's oppositional imperative should be understood to reside in its appropriation of American social critiques in order to criticize Italian society. As many scholars have come to believe, in other words, the importance of the American mythology was a function not of what Italian intellectuals read—both Fascists and anti-Fascists could and did read American literature, after all—but rather of *how* they read. Fascist writers tended to present an absolute separation between American social critiques and Italian society so that, in Billiani's words, the Fascist regime "did not block, but transformed, the foreign influx" ("non bloccò, ma travestì, l'ingresso dello straniero").<sup>35</sup> Providing an example of how this worked in practice, Jane Dunnett has shown how the 1940 Italian translation of John Steinbeck's novel *In Dubious Battle* was presented as a stinging critique of American inequality, but one explicitly declared not to apply to Italy, "a country where the class struggle, as understood by Steinbeck, no longer exists" ("un paese dove le lotte di classe, nel senso inteso dallo Steinbeck, non esistono più"), as the work's Italian preface affirmed.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, Vittorini, Pavese, and the *americanisti* seized upon and championed many literary works that offered a critical vision of American society precisely

<sup>33</sup> On the image of America in Fascist Italy, see Emilio Gentile, "Impending Modernity: Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the United States," *Journal of Contemporary History* 28, no. 1 (Jan. 1993): 7-29; Michela Nacci, *L'antiamericanismo in Italia negli anni Trenta* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989); Claudia Damiani, *Mussolini e gli Stati Uniti. 1922-1935* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1980); and Giovanni Sciola, "L'immagine dei nemici. L'America e gli americani nella propaganda italiana della Seconda guerra mondiale," *Italies* 5 (2001): 2-18.

<sup>34</sup> Francesco Billiani, "Identity and Otherness: Translating Policies in Fascist Italy," *Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies (CTIS)* 3 (2006): 59, 69. It is noteworthy, too, that translations of American literature remained available even in libraries which were under the direct control of the state's Ministry of Education. On this point, see George Talbot, *Censorship in Fascist Italy, 1922-43* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 156. On the politics of translation in Fascist Italy, see also Francesca Billiani, *Culture nazionali e narrazioni straniere: Italia, 1903-1943* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2007); Guido Bonsaver, *Censorship and Literature in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Giorgio Fabre, "Fascism, Censorship and Translations," in *Modes of Censorship and Translation: National Contexts and Diverse Media*, ed. Francesca Billiani (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2007), 27-59; and Christopher Rundle, *Publishing Translations in Fascist Italy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Francesca Billiani, *Culture nazionali e narrazioni straniere*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> The quotation from the Steinbeck preface, as well as its English translation, can be found in Jane Dunnett, "Foreign Literature in Fascist Italy: Circulation and Censorship," in *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 15, no. 2 (2002): 111.

because that critique could be made in turn to apply to their own situation in Italy. In texts such as *In Dubious Battle*, Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, and Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*—texts which satirized American attitudes, pilloried American culture, and condemned American injustices—the *americanisti* discovered a critical outlook that they could apply to interwar Italy.<sup>37</sup> Seeing the United States as an allegory for universal experience, they were able to find in American literature not a critique of American society alone, but rather of all societies, and of Italian society in particular. America was, for Vittorini, a “type of universal literature in one language” (“specie di letteratura universale ad una lingua sola”).<sup>38</sup> For Pavese, “America was not *another* country, a *new* historical beginning, but rather a giant theater in which the collective drama was performed more openly than elsewhere” (“l’America non era un *altro* paese, un *nuovo* inizio della storia, ma soltanto il gigantesco teatro dove con maggiore franchezza che altrove veniva recitato il dramma di tutti”).<sup>39</sup> Thus, as Giaime Pintor declared in an essay published posthumously in 1945, for the *americanisti* “[t]his America has no need of Columbus, it is discovered within us, it is the land to which we turn with the same hope as the first emigrants and the same faith as those determined to defend the dignity of the human condition even at the cost of exhaustion and error” (“[q]uesta America non ha bisogno di Colombo, essa è scoperta dentro di noi, è la terra a cui si tende con la stessa speranza e la stessa fiducia dei primi emigranti e di chiunque sia deciso a difendere a prezzo di fatiche e di errori la dignità della condizione umana”).<sup>40</sup> Understood allegorically, then, America could represent Italy, and the critiques mounted by American writers against their own society could be brought to bear on Italian social problems. The universalizing, allegorical, and self-reflective mode of reading American literature that characterized the *mito dell’America* thus became central to the oppositional stance adopted by Italian intellectuals as they sought to project a new Italian society after Fascism.

My contention is that the very same mode of interpretation underwrites *impegno nero*, which should therefore be understood to have reprised and advanced Italy’s earlier *mito dell’America*. Scholars have tended instead, however, to speak of a postwar rupture with prewar *americanismo* or an “end of the myth of America,” which is said to have occurred between 1947 and 1950, precisely the years that witnessed the intensification of *impegno nero*.<sup>41</sup> To be sure,

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<sup>37</sup> My argument, which stresses the use of American social criticism in order to criticize Fascist Italy, revises earlier interpretations of the “mito dell’America,” which tended largely to argue that Vittorini, Pavese, and others “worshipped America without knowing it,” that the characters in American literature “symbolized freedom and an antidote against fascist oppression,” in the words of Mira Liehm. I argue, in contrast, that the *americanisti* tended not to champion works celebrating American society but rather those that criticized it, and thus not naively to worship America, but rather pointedly to challenge it as a way of appropriating American social critiques for their own cause. Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 36.

<sup>38</sup> Elio Vittorini, “Notizia su Saroyan,” originally in *Letteratura* 2, no. 5 (Jan. 1938): 141-43, now in *Letteratura arte società*, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Cesare Pavese, “Ieri e oggi,” originally in *L’Unità* (3 Aug. 1947), now in *La letteratura americana e altri saggi*, 173-175.

<sup>40</sup> Giaime Pintor, “La lotta contro gli idoli,” in *Il sangue d’Europa (1939-1943)*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1965), 159.

<sup>41</sup> On the supposed end of the *mito dell’America*, see Luciana Castellina, “Fine del mito americano,” in *Il mito americano: Origine e crisi di un modello culturale*, ed. Saveria Chemotti (Padua: CLEUP, 1980), 35-57; Mario Domenichelli, “Influssi stranieri sulle italiane lettere nel Novecento,” in *Strutture dell’immaginario. Profilo del Novecento letterario italiano*, ed. Rocco Mario Morano (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2007), 371-99 (esp. pp. 388-91, “La fine del mito americano”); Agostino Lombardo, *La ricerca del vero. Saggi sulla tradizione letteraria*

these claims regarding the decline of the American mythology are not entirely unfounded. In the preface to the 1948 re-publication of his novel *Il garofano rosso*, after all, Elio Vittorini had made clear that he had been mistaken in his longstanding advocacy of American literature because “we had thought that, with the help of American innovations, we could have entered into poetic maturity and into a poetic tradition of the novel. But it was not that. It was still adolescence” (“si pensava che attraverso l’aiuto della freschezza americana si sarebbe forse entrati in una maturità poetica e in una tradizione poetica del romanzo. Ma non era questo. Era ancora adolescenza”).<sup>42</sup> What is more, in May 1947 Cesare Pavese had made an even more forceful repudiation of his own American mythology: “The period in which we discovered America is over” (“Sono finiti i tempi in cui scoprivamo l’America”), Pavese announced during a RAI broadcast that many scholars cite as the end of the American myth, “and we can predict that for some decades nothing more will come from that nation to rival the names and the revelations that enthralled our prewar youth” (“e si può prevedere che per qualche decennio non ci verrà più da quel popolo nulla di simile ai nomi e alle rivelazioni che entusiasmarono la nostra giovinezza prebellica”).<sup>43</sup> I argue, however, that despite appearances, Vittorini’s declaration and even Pavese’s broadcast were part of a reformation and renewal of the *mito dell’America*, rather than a rejection.

Indeed, I believe that *impegno nero* effectively took over where the *mito dell’America* had left off. In this regard, it is significant, and worth parsing, that the RAI broadcast in which Pavese gave voice to his supposed break with American literature was devoted to a discussion of the Italian translation of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*. While emphasizing the stagnation of American culture, Pavese remarked on that occasion upon the African-American author’s literary innovations, suggesting that his “verbal tools [...] have served him marvelously” (“mezzi verbali [...] gli hanno servito a meraviglia”), and placing him within the “tradition of great narrative prose” (“tradizione della grande prosa narrativa”). In short, Pavese identified Wright as the vital center of an otherwise outmoded American tradition.<sup>44</sup> Several months before Pavese’s radio address, moreover, Vittorini had reached the same conclusion, arguing that, while American literature appeared to be stagnating, there was nonetheless a “recent development” (“ultima novità”) to be found in the work of writers like “Richard Wright, who are the children of races that have been persecuted or humiliated, or merely tolerated, [...] bastards in comparison with the group that dominates American society” (“che sono figli delle razze perseguitate o umiliate, o appena tollerate, [...] bastardi rispetto al ceppo umano che domina nella società d’oltre Atlantico”).<sup>45</sup> If it is true, therefore, that the Italian discovery of American literature peaked

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*americana* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1961), 54; David Ellwood, “Containing Modernity, Domesticating America in Italy,” in *The Americanization of Europe: Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945*, ed. Alexander Stephan (Berghahn Books, 2007), 253-76; and Martino Marazzi, “La crisi americana di Pavese e Vittorini,” *Il demone dell’anticipazione. Cultura, letteratura, editoria in Elio Vittorini*, ed. Edoardo Esposito (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2009), 47-8. A more nuanced interpretation is offered by Edoardo Esposito, who argues that, with the fall of Fascism, “[i]l mito dell’America finiva esso stesso per non aver più ragione di esistere,” but who notes nonetheless that, in view of Vittorini’s continuing interest in American literature after the war, “[n]on è infatti con il 1945 che egli cessa di interessarsi agli americani.” Edoardo Esposito, *L’America dopo American. Elio Vittorini consulente Mondadori* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Elio Vittorini, “Prefazione a ‘Il garofano rosso,’” originally in *Il garofano rosso* (Milan: Mondadori, 1948), 7-38, now in *Letteratura arte società*, 489.

<sup>43</sup> Cesare Pavese, “Richard Wright,” 169.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>45</sup> Elio Vittorini, “[Sulla letteratura americana],” originally in *Il Politecnico* 31-32 (July-August 1946): 50, now in *Letteratura arte società*, 324.

before the Second World War, as Pavese asserted in his radio broadcast and Vittorini asserted in his preface, it is not at all the case that American authors and movements had ceased entirely to inspire the coming generations of Italian writers, nor that the myth of America in Italy had reached its conclusion.

In fact, drawing on African-American literature and appropriating African-American critiques of the United States, Pavese and Vittorini were at the forefront of postwar *impegno nero*, not only joining, but in many senses leading the effort to renew the model that they had established with the prewar *mito dell'America*. Their characteristic approach, in which the interpretation of American literature served to advance a critique of Italian society, is apparent in Pavese's emphasis on what he believed to be Italians' growing sympathy for Richard Wright's descriptions of the "daily hunger masked with mouthfuls of water, or the blinding fear that the whites, the 'enemies', unrestrained, will organize a lynching" ("fame quotidiana ingannata ingozzandosi d'acqua o del cieco terrore che i bianchi, i 'nemici', si scatenino e organizzino un linciaggio"). This sympathy, Pavese suggested, was a direct result of Italy's experiences during the war.

Is there anyone among us, any white person, who has not stared hunger and racial terror in the face, and who can swear that tomorrow these specters will not return? This is the message, the truest word, of *Black Boy*. The authentic and suffered fruit of human sorrow and fortune that concerns all of us.

C'è qualcuno di noi, qualche bianco, che non abbia visto in faccia la fame e il terrore razziale, che possa giurare che domani questi spettri non risorgeranno? È questo il messaggio, la parola più vera di *Ragazzo negro* [the Italian title of Wright's *Black Boy*]. Il frutto autentico e sofferto di un'umana sofferenza e avventura, che ci concerne tutti quanti.<sup>46</sup>

In *Black Boy*, Wright described the perils of an African-American childhood in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee. For Pavese, however, the systematic persecution of blacks in the Jim Crow South was analogous to that which many Italians had experienced under Fascism, the Nazi occupation, and the fight for liberation. He argued, therefore, that Wright's account had taken on added significance for Italian readers after the Second World War, having come to signify, to exemplify, and to amplify their inchoate responses to the horrors of war.

The same mode of interpretation, the same endeavor to discover in African-American literature analogies to the Italian experience, is evident in the postwar essays of Elio Vittorini. As early as December 1945, in fact, Vittorini argued that the racism, poverty, and violence decried by much African-American literature were mirrored in the Italian war-time experience. In an introductory note in *Il Politecnico* to a translation of a W. E. B. Du Bois poem, "A Litany at Atlanta," Vittorini explained that:

Atlanta is famous, amongst American cities, for a massacre of Negroes that was carried out there. This 'Litany at Atlanta' refers to that fact. But its writer wished

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<sup>46</sup> Cesare Pavese, "Richard Wright," 171.

for it to refer to the daily suffering of Negroes in America. We are publishing it because it can refer to us. Poetry is poetry for this reason; it does not remain bound to the circumstances from which it has arisen and, if it is born from pain, it can refer to all pain. If for no other reasons than hunger, cold and disappointment, could not millions of Europeans today unite their voices to this *old Negro song*?

Atlanta è famosa, tra le città americane, per un massacro di negri che vi fu compiuto. Questa 'Litania di Atlanta' si riferisce a quel fatto. Ma chi la scrisse volle riferirla alle sofferenze d'ogni giorno del popolo negro in America. Noi la pubblichiamo perché possiamo riferirla anche a noi. La poesia è per questo poesia; perché non resta legata alle cose da cui ha avuto origine e si può riferirla, se nasce da dolore ad ogni dolore. Quanti milioni di europei non potrebbero, oggi unire le loro voci, non fosse altro che per fame, freddo e delusione, a questo vecchio *canto dei negri d'America*?<sup>47</sup>

Vittorini thus sought to universalize, or rather to Italianize, the event recounted by Du Bois, the September 1906 Atlanta Race Riot in which thousands of whites attacked hundreds of blacks, murdering dozens. Arguing that, despite the poem's historical specificity, "it can refer to us," Vittorini implied that America's racism and segregation were akin to the oppression and suffering of Italians, that the black experience had become a collective experience. Having been made familiar with racially-motivated mob violence, Vittorini argued, Europeans could now understand, with first-hand knowledge, events like those recounted in Du Bois's poem. Just as Pavese suggested that racism and racial violence were examples of a kind of suffering that, in the wake of the Second World War, "concerns all of us," in other words, so too did Vittorini argue that "millions of Europeans" could now identify with the victims of race hatred in Atlanta. Not only that, but those same Europeans could also begin to join with African Americans in protesting their condition and fighting for change.

Vittorini's invocation of this united struggle against oppression, his call for Europeans to "unite their voices to this *old Negro song*," is one of the clearest expressions both of *impegno nero* after the war and of the underlying sentiments of the interwar *mito dell'America*. Reflecting on that interwar myth as it had been elaborated by Vittorini and Pavese, Italo Calvino argued that "America was an enormous allegory for our problems, for us, the Italians of that time, for our evil and our good, for our conservatism and for our need for rebellion" ("l'America era una gigantesca allegoria dei problemi nostri, di noi italiani d'allora, del nostro male e del nostro bene, del nostro conservatorismo e del nostro bisogno di ribellione").<sup>48</sup> The postwar myth, with its emphasis on the African-American experience, similarly presented an "enormous allegory," offering a vision of the protracted efforts to right the wrongs of Fascism, to meet the challenges of reconstruction, and to remake Italy after the war, and grounding that vision in a symbolic reading of African-American literature. The anthologies celebrating African-American writers, the essays affirming their originality and virtuosity, the new literary histories giving pride of

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<sup>47</sup> Introduction to W. E. B. Du Bois, "La litania di Atlanta," trans. Domenico Porzio, *Il Politecnico* 13-14 (December 22-29, 1945): 1. The introductory note is anonymous but is attributed to Vittorini in Anna Panicali, *Elio Vittorini: la narrativa, la saggistica, le traduzioni, le riviste, l'attività editoriale* (Milan: Mursia, 1994), 242.

<sup>48</sup> Italo Calvino, "Tre correnti del romanzo italiano d'oggi," in *Saggi 1945-1985*, Vol. 1, 63-64.

place to the black experience, all reinforced the transformation, rather than the abandonment, of the *mito dell'America* as it had been formulated in the 1930s. Like the *americanisti* before them, these texts make clear, the advocates of *impegno nero* found in America a provocation for change and a model for reform. In their writings, the African-American experience became the new “universal literature,” the new “giant theater,” the new “myth of America,” and *impegno nero* was defined and empowered by this attempted allegoresis, by the efforts of Italian intellectuals to transmute their sympathetic reading of African-American literature into a corrective intervention in Italian society. Interpreting the work of black writers, they were also working to transform Italian society; denouncing American racism, they were also condemning Italy’s own failures. Like the *mito dell'America*, therefore, *impegno nero* was characterized by its mode of interpretation, its efforts to discern and to display Italy’s shortcomings by appropriating social critiques that had originated in American literature.

The innovation of *impegno nero* lay not in the *fact* of reading African-American writers, that is to say, but rather in the *act* of interpretation, in the self-reflective and self-critical hermeneutic with which postwar Italian intellectuals approached the text. This point requires particular emphasis, because neither the interest in African-American literature nor the criticism of American racism were themselves developments of the postwar period. Indeed, in Fascist Italy the work of black writers had been both surprisingly prevalent and remarkably esteemed. Contrary to expectations, perhaps, Italian commentators had been allowed to devote significant attention to African-American culture relatively unimpeded throughout the Fascist *ventennio*, and African-American writers, artists, musicians, and actors had been received seriously and with great interest, attracting popular, critical, and academic recognition in Mussolini’s Italy. Already in 1925, for instance, Arnaldo Cipolla had used an account of his travels *Nell'America del Nord* to argue that, artistically speaking, blacks in the United States were superior to whites.<sup>49</sup> Assessing the Harlem Renaissance, “La rinascita negra,” in *La Stampa* in 1926, Aldo Sorani cited Alan Locke’s *The New Negro* and the writings of W. E. B. DuBois as evidence that African-American literature was on the rise.<sup>50</sup> In her 1929 analysis of the *Vita Americana*, Irene Di Robilant praised the work of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay.<sup>51</sup> Franco Ciarlantini also commented favorably on Dunbar, Cullen, and McKay, as well as DuBois, and Langston Hughes in his 1934 chronicle *Roma-Nuova York e ritorno*.<sup>52</sup> And, citing these same five authors, Emilio Cecchi extolled African-American literature in his otherwise quite critical and jaundiced 1939 account of culture and society in the United States, *America amara*.<sup>53</sup> Under Fascism, moreover, readers could encounter not only critical acclamations but also Italian translations of many important works of African-American literature. Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* were among the works by black authors published in translation during the Fascist *ventennio*, and in the same period the journals *Circoli*, *Letteratura*, and *L'Orto* hosted works by black poets including Cullen, Dunbar, Hughes, McKay, Gwendolyn Bennett, Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr., Waring Cuney, Georgia

<sup>49</sup> Arnaldo Cipolla, *Nell'America del Nord. Impressioni di viaggio in Alaska, Stati Uniti e Canada* (Turin: G.B. Paravia & C., 1925), 146.

<sup>50</sup> Aldo Sorani, “La rinascita negra,” *La Stampa*, August 9, 1926, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Irene di Robilant, *Vita americana (Stati Uniti del Nord-America)* (Turin: Fratelli Rocca Editori, 1929), 386-7.

<sup>52</sup> Franco Ciarlantini, *Roma-Nuova York e ritorno. Tragedie dell'americanismo* (Milan: Casa Editrice Giacomo Agnelli, 1934), 214.

<sup>53</sup> Emilio Cecchi, “Spirituals,” originally “Spirituali” in *L'illustrazione del medico* 4, no. 28 (May 1936), now in *America amara*, in *Saggi e viaggi*, ed. Margherita Ghilardi (Milan: Mondadori, 1997), 1188-94.

Douglas Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson.<sup>54</sup> In many respects, intellectuals under Fascism were as interested in African-American literature, and as outspoken in the criticisms of American racism, as were their counterparts after the war, and this must necessarily undermine any straightforward opposition between pre- and postwar treatments of these themes.

Instead, as was the case with the *mito dell'America*, the difference should be seen to lie in how the themes were treated, how they were interpreted, and what conclusions they were asked to support. Under Fascism, criticisms of American racism were frequently transfigured in such a way as to advance the Fascist cause. Paradoxically, therefore, the racist policies of the Fascist regime often coexisted with, and were even reinforced by, denunciations of the racist policies of the United States.<sup>55</sup> Fascist-era travel writing, newspaper reporting, literature and literary histories, films and film criticism, and even Fascist propaganda, all presented strident but compromised critiques of the injustice of American racism.<sup>56</sup> In his 1928 account of the *Vita*

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<sup>54</sup> Claude McKay, *Ritorno ad Harlem* (Milan: Soc. anon. "Modernissima," 1930). Zora Neale Hurston, *I loro occhi guardavano Dio*, trans. Ada Prospero (Turin: Frassinelli, 1938), ix-xx. *Circoli: Rivista di poesia* 3, no. 6 (November-December 1933) included work by Langston Hughes in an anthology otherwise devoted to white American poets. Works by Countee Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and James Weldon Johnson were published as an "Antologia di poeti negri nordamericani," *Letteratura* 1, no. 4 (October 1937): 98-105. In his introduction to *Letteratura's* anthology, Luigi Berti argued that it presented African-American literature as "una delle principali attrattive e curiosità che una letteratura possa vantare." Luigi Berti, "Veduta sulla poesia negra nordamericana," originally in *Letteratura* 1, no. 4 (October 1937), now in *Boccaporto* (Florence: Parenti, 1940), 97-115. Berti also translated three poems by Langston Hughes, publishing them under the titles "Sputacchiere d'ottone," "Come diventai più vecchio," and "Un negro parla di fiumi," in *L'Orto* 3 (1935).

<sup>55</sup> On Fascist racism, see Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002); Francesco Cassata, "La Difesa della razza," in *Politica, ideologia e immagine del razzismo fascista* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008); Roberto Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1999); Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Barbara Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi. Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interraziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890-1941)* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1998); Barbara Sòrgoni, "Racist Discourses and Practices in the Italian Empire under Fascism," in *The Politics of Recognizing Difference: Multiculturalism Italian-style*, eds. Ralph Grillo and Jeff Pratt (Aldershot: Aldgate Publishing Limited, 2002), 41-58; Giulia Barrera, "The Construction of Racial Hierarchies in Colonial Eritrea: The Liberal Period and the Early Fascist Period (1897-1934)," in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 81-115; Gianluca Gabrielli, "Prime ricognizioni sui fondamenti teorici della politica fascista contro i meticci," in *Studi sul razzismo italiano*, eds. Alberto Burgio and Luciano Casali (Bologna: Clueb, 1996), 61-88; and the relevant essays in Alberto Burgio, ed., *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d'Italia, 1870-1945* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1999). On the rise of anti-American Fascist propaganda, see Centro Furio Jesi, ed., *La menzogna della razza: Documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell'antisemitismo fascista* (Bologna: Grafis Edizioni, 1994); Giovanni Sciola, "L'immagine dei nemici. L'America e gli Americani nella propaganda italiana della Seconda guerra mondiale," *Italies* 5 (2001): 2-18; and the Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, ed., *1943-1945. L'immagine della RSI nella propaganda* (Milan: Nuove edizioni Gabriele Mazzotta, 1985).

<sup>56</sup> On the European encounter with blacks in America, see Lenworth Gunther, ed., *Black Image: European Eyewitness Accounts of Afro-American Life* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1978). For references to African Americans in Fascist-era accounts of travel to the United States, see especially the chapter "Razzismo e melting pot," in Ambra Meda, *Al di là del mito. Scrittori italiani in viaggio negli Stati Uniti* (Florence: Vallecchi, 2011), 263-84. For narratives of American travel published under Fascism, see also Giuseppe Massara, *Viaggiatori italiani in America (1870-1970)* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1976); Charles Burdett, *Journeys Through Fascism: Italian Travel Writing Between the Wars* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2007); Paolo Orvieto, "L'America o il luogo dell'altro e dell'altrove," in *Italiani e stranieri nella tradizione letteraria. Atti del Convegno di Montepulciano 8-10 ottobre 2007* (Rome: Salerno editrice, 2007), 205-82; Francesco Ghelli, "L'impero dei consumi. Scrittori europei in viaggio negli Stati Uniti 1930-1986," *Allegoria* 20.58 (2008): 143-71; Valter Leonardo Puccetti, "'Mente puritana in corpo pagano'. Una formula per l'America nell'Italia fascista, tra Emilio Cecchi e Delfino Cinelli," *Intersezioni* 2 (2008): 273-95.

*d’America*, Arnaldo Fraccaroli recounted with a tone of horror and disgust the existence in the South of “extraordinary laws [...] which take from Negroes their most important electoral rights” (“speciali leggi [...] che tolgono ai negri i più importanti diritti elettorali”), and lamented as well that in the North “the board of education prevents Negro children from attending white schools” (“il board of education impedisce ai ragazzi negri di frequentare le scuole dei bianchi”).<sup>57</sup> In *Vita Americana*, Irene di Robilant expressed her belief that, despite Americans’ claims to the contrary, “racial persecution persists and [...] race hatred shows little sign of extinction” (“la persecuzione persista tuttora e [...] l’odio di razza tardi molto a spegnersi”).<sup>58</sup> Even a staunch Fascist like Franco Ciarlantini, who represented the Fascist Party (PNF) in parliament and wrote volumes in praise of Hitler, Mussolini, and Italian colonial expansion in Africa, was among those to oppose American racism, denouncing in his 1929 *Incontro col Nord America* what he called “the brutal suppression of a race, beyond all legal limits, by means of intimidation” (“la brutale sovrapposizione di una razza, mantenuta coll’intimidimento, al di fuori di ogni legalità”).<sup>59</sup> Examples of such evident contradictions abound. Italian commentators who overlooked or even approved of Italy’s Race Laws often claimed to be appalled by American racism.

They condemned in particular what Emilio Cecchi called the “diabolical dementia” (“diabolica demenza”) of American lynch mobs.<sup>60</sup> In an article entitled “3200 linciaggi e un progetto parlamentare [3200 Lynchings and a Parliamentary Project],” first published in the *Corriere della Sera* in 1938 and then included in *America amara*, Cecchi sought to provide a graphic illustration of the reality behind the shocking statistic with which he opened his account—the claim that “between 1882 and 1937 more than 5110 people were lynched in the United States” (“[d]al 1882 al 1937 furono linciate agli Stati Uniti oltre 5110 persone”)—and told of the horror and the injustice of a 1934 lynching in Florida for which, despite hundreds of eyewitnesses, there was “no clue pointing to the guilty, no arrest” (“nessun indizio di colpevoli, nessun arresto”).<sup>61</sup> In a 1933 article on “L’invasione negra” (“The Negro Invasion”), Amerigo Ruggiero reported on “[t]he lynchings, the torture, the cannibal cruelty inflicted on Negroes, who are burned alive in broad daylight in the crowded squares of the cities most infected by the fanaticism of racial superiority” (“[i] linciaggi, le torture, le crudeltà da cannibali applicate ai negri, arsi vivi in pieno giorno nelle piazze affollate dei centri più infetti dal fanatismo della supremazia di razza”).<sup>62</sup> In a 1939 article offering the shocking assertion that “[a]t least two Negroes are lynched in America every day” (“[a]lmeno due negri al giorno vengono linciati in America”), Carlo Bruni explained to his Italian readers that, while lynching may seem a barbaric remnant of the distant past, with its spectacle of a black man’s “slow death, after torment and torture which, if recounted, would elicit a sense of horror, sending shivers up your spine [morte lenta, dopo strazi e torture, il cui solo racconto guasta il sangue e suscita un senso d’orrore]”, it

<sup>57</sup> Arnaldo Fraccaroli, *Vita d’America* (Milan: Fratelli Treves Editori, 1928), 89.

<sup>58</sup> Irene di Robilant, *Vita Americana*, 388.

<sup>59</sup> Franco Ciarlantini, *Incontro col Nord America* (Milan: Edizioni “Alpes,” 1929), 71-2. For his support of Hitler, see Franco Ciarlantini, *Hitler e il fascismo* (Florence: Bemporad, 1933). For his support of Mussolini, see Franco Ciarlantini, *Mussolini immaginario* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1933). For his support of colonialism, see Franco Ciarlantini, *Africa romana* (Milan: Edizioni “Alpes,” 1928); and Franco Ciarlantini, *Seconda guerra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1938). For further examples of Ciarlantini’s Fascist loyalties, see Franco Ciarlantini, *Dieci anni di fascismo* (Lanciano: Carabba, 1931); and Franco Ciarlantini, *Il capo e la folla* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1935).

<sup>60</sup> Emilio Cecchi, “Linciaggi,” originally “3200 linciaggi e un progetto parlamentare,” *Corriere della Sera*, January 25, 1938, now in *America amara*, 1194-1199.

<sup>61</sup> Emilio Cecchi, “Linciaggi,” 1194-1199.

<sup>62</sup> Amerigo Ruggiero, “L’invasione negra” *La Stampa*, April 12, 1933, 3.



was, in fact, anything but: “[l]ynching is a relatively recent institution. It is a creation of our age, and not even the most optimistic can delude themselves into believing that, sooner or later, it will disappear” (“[i]l linciaggio è un’istituzione relativamente recente. Appartiene ai giorni nostri; e nemmeno i più ottimisti s’illudono di poter assistere, prima o poi, alla sua scomparsa”).<sup>63</sup> Such criticisms are often no less valid, nor less affecting, than those put forward after the Second World War. What is striking, however, is that, whereas the postwar engagement with the African-American struggle was intimately linked with Italian efforts to counteract the influence of Fascism and to reform the nation after the Second World War, this earlier engagement coexisted with the very principles of Fascism that postwar intellectuals would most oppose.

Indeed, the efforts to underline the problems of race in the United States and to garner sympathy for the plight of African Americans were in many ways central to Fascist self-justification. Italian colonialism, for instance, was frequently justified through references to what Fascist intellectuals believed to be the far worse crimes committed against blacks in the United States. Thus Giacomo Ebner, in an *Inchiesta sulla schiavitù* [*Investigation of Slavery*] commissioned in 1928 by the Italian governing authority in Tripoli, explained that “in the territories under our dominion slavery does not exist in any form” (“nei territori soggetti al nostro diretto dominio non esiste la schiavitù in nessuna forma”), and that blacks under Italian rule were in fact treated quite well, in contrast to the “truly bestial treatment of the Negro by the English colonizers in America, so effectively described, without pretense, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” [davvero bestiale trattamento del negro da parte dei coloni inglesi in America, così efficacemente descritto, in veste senza pretese, nella ‘Capanna dello zio Tom’]. Emphasizing that, “in the United States the ‘racial barrier’ is constantly raised before the eyes of people of color, and particularly the Negro” (“[n]egli Stati Uniti la ‘barriera di razza’ si eleva ad ogni istante innanzi agli occhi dell’uomo di colore, e particolarmente del negro”), Ebner called attention to what he saw as the more equitable and just organization of the Italian colonies, arguing that

between the status of the Negro in the United States of America and that of the Negro in the pre-desert regions of Gheriat and Uadi Esc-Sciati there are profound differences, which are by no means to the favor of that rich and boundless land often claimed to be the place where the individual enjoys the greatest freedom on Earth.

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<sup>63</sup> Carlo Bruni, “Civiltà dei puritani d’oltre oceano. Almeno due negri al giorno vengono linciati in America,” *La Stampa Sera*, May 27, 1939, 3. I believe that these Fascist-era accounts of lynchings reflect not only Italian commentators’ horror at the treatment of blacks in the United States, but also their consciousness that Italians, too, had been the victims of American vigilantes. Further investigation is needed in order to support this assertion, but it is noteworthy that, as an 1899 *New York Sun* account of one lynching explained, “[t]he unwritten law of the South is that a white man shall not be lynched . . . The only exception is the Italian who in this respect has been placed on terms of equality with the Negro.” *New York Sun*, August 4, 1899, cited in Peter Vellon, “‘Between White Men and Negroes’: The Perception of Southern Italian Immigrants Through the Lens of Italian Lynchings,” in *Anti-Italianism: Essays on a Prejudice* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 26. See also Patrizia Salvetti, *Corda e sapone. Storie di linciaggi degli italiani negli Stati Uniti* (Roma: Donzelli, 2003); Marco Rimanelli and Sheryl L. Postman, eds., *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and U.S.-Italian Relations: A Look Back* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992); George E. Cunningham, “The Italian, a Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana, 1890-1898,” *The Journal of Negro History* 50, no. 1 (January 1965): 22-36; Humbert S. Nelli, *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930: A Study in Ethnic Mobility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 130-32; and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

fra la posizione del negro negli Stati Uniti d'America e quella del negro nelle zone predesertiche del Gheriát e dello Sciati vi sono differenze profonde, tuttavia non nel senso favorevole a quella ricca e sconfinata terra ch'è pure designata come il luogo del mondo ove l'individuo gode la più ampia libertà.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, in a 1940 study of “Razzismo negli Stati Uniti” (“Racism in the United States”) offered as part of a conference on the “Politica fascista della razza”—a summit devoted to the defense and promotion of Fascist racism—Luigi Villari argued that, as a result of American racism, it was reasonable to “cast some doubt on the value of Americans’ frequent criticism of those European countries that have found it necessary to enact policies of a racist nature” (“gettare qualche dubbio sul valore delle critiche che gli Americani sogliono muovere a quei paesi europei che hanno ritenuto necessario emanare misure di carattere razzista”).<sup>65</sup> This was a common refrain in Fascist discourse, and Ebner and Villari were among the many supporters of Italian Fascism to decry American racism as part of a defense or justification of the policies of the Fascist regime.

Moreover, as the hostility between Italy and the United States steadily increased, Italian newspapers exploited accounts of American racism to serve as propaganda, seeking to motivate feelings of enmity toward the United States by drawing upon the large and ready reserve of critical sentiment regarding the country’s racial inequalities. In *La Stampa*, for example, a 1941 article framed the impending American intervention as an outgrowth of American racism, stressing that race hatred, which had “begun with the Negroes” (“cominciato con i negri”), was now spreading, that “[e]very American holds within his heart his own particular aversion towards people of another creed, another color, another origin” (“[o]gnuno nutre nel proprio seno la sua particolare avversione contro persone di un altro credo, di un altro colore, di un’altra origine”).<sup>66</sup> In 1942, an article asserting that “England is looking for workers and America for cannon fodder” (“L’Inghilterra cerca operai e l’America carne da cannone”) argued that, even as white Americans were seeking to “cajole Negroes so that they will enlist” (“blandire i negri finché servono”), they did not hesitate to “mistreat them and lynch them whenever they like and whenever it is convenient” (“maltrattarli e linciarli quando fa comodo e piacere”). Another, arguing that “The persecution of Negroes continues unabated in America” (“La persecuzione contro i negri continua implacabile in America”), made clear that “war has not extinguished the vicious persecution of which American Negroes are the victims, however much the government has sought to garner for the war effort the contributions of people of color” (“[l]a guerra non ha spento la feroce persecuzione di cui sono vittime i negri degli Stati Uniti, quantunque il governo abbia sollecitato l’apporto bellico della popolazione di colore”).<sup>67</sup> Article after article emphasized that African Americans were victims of their country’s “vicious persecution,”

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<sup>64</sup> Giacomo Ebner, *Inchiesta sulla schiavitù* (Rome: Società italiana arti grafiche editrice, 1940), 15, 21, 48. The title page of Ebner’s study refers to the work as a “relazione circa l’inchiesta sulla schiavitù in Tripolitania, eseguita nel febbraio 1928 d’ordine delle Autorità governative e giudiziarie di Tripoli.”

<sup>65</sup> Luigi Villari, “Razzismo negli Stati Uniti,” in *Politica fascista della razza* (Rome: Istituto Nazionale di Cultura Fascista, 1940), 116.

<sup>66</sup> Amerigo Ruggiero, “Razzismo d’oltre Atlantico. Gli americani si sono accorti di avere i negri in casa,” *La Stampa*, October 23, 1941, 3.

<sup>67</sup> “L’Inghilterra cerca operai e l’America carne da cannone. I negri—votati al sacrificio dai loro aguzzini—si agitano al grido: ‘la democrazia anche per noi,’” *La Stampa* 2 Aug. 1942; “La persecuzione contro i negri continua implacabile in America,” *La Stampa*, September 21, 1942, 1.

mistreated by the government they were enlisting to defend and hated by the citizens they were working to protect. In their sheer number, as well as in their shocking details, these articles led, as if inexorably, to a larger conclusion: the America they reveal is not only a hateful nation, characterized by violence, injustice, and belligerence, but also an enemy nation, opposed to Italian values and incompatible with Italian society. Accumulating and emphasizing reports of American racism, that is to say, Fascist-era newspapers successfully stigmatized the United States and reinforced Italian opposition to American interests. Indeed, inspiring compassion for African Americans, the newspapers sought to inspire support for the Italian war effort. They condemned American racism insofar as it served this cause, but no further.

Noted writers of the Fascist period criticized American racism, sympathized with the plight of African Americans, and championed important works of African-American literature. What they did not do, however, was undertake any self-critique in light of their celebration of black culture and criticisms of American racism. If anything, their criticisms served to pre-empt self-reflection and to spare Italians from any admonishment. Carlo Bruni's point in emphasizing the "sense of horror" he felt in learning of the torture and lynching of African Americans, after all, was that the American government's continuing tolerance of these racially-motivated attacks made its criticism of Italy's racial policies inherently suspect.

America at times presumes to stand at the pulpit and to lecture old Europe. There is an entire philanthropic rhetoric, wordy and mannered, puritanical, *Made in the U.S.A.*, destined for export and accepted abroad with great reverence. Rhetoric that emerges from a country which lynches a couple of Negroes each day. Rhetoric that fails to explain, however, that these summary executions are the consequence of an entrenched system and the crude revelation of a people's mentality.

L'America a volte pretende di salire in cattedra per dare lezioni alla vecchia Europa. Esiste tutta una retorica filantropica, verbosa e di maniera, puritaneggiante, made in U.S.A., destinata alla esportazione ed accettata altrove, a volte con reverenza. Una retorica che parte dal paese che lincia un paio di negri al giorno. Una retorica che però non ci spiega che queste esecuzioni sommarie sono la conseguenza d'un sistema radicato e la cruda rivelazione della mentalità di tutto un popolo.<sup>68</sup>

In light of its legally enforced racial inequalities and frequent explosions of racist violence, Bruni argued, the United States forfeited the right to reproach Europeans or to instruct them on the proper conduct toward those of other races. Emilio Cecchi, too, was led to question the validity of the American government's attacks on Italian racism, arguing that

American hedonism and utilitarianism are mirrored in the infinite aspects of the racial problem. Sympathy and solidarity for the German and Italian Jews, so long as it serves the arguments in favor of democracy. And suspicion and guerilla

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<sup>68</sup> Carlo Bruni, "Civiltà dei puritani d'oltre oceano," 3.

warfare against the Jews of Wall Street whenever financial advantage is at stake. Ardent love for Ethiopian Negroes. And obstruction [...] of the efforts to pass laws against lynching: laws that American Negroes would certainly have liked.

l'edonismo e l'utilitarismo americano si rispecchiano nelle infinite sfaccettature del problema razziale. Simpatia e solidarietà per gli ebrei tedeschi e italiani, finché giovi agli effetti della polemica democratica. E sospetto e guerriglia contro gli ebrei di Wall Street, non appena si presti al tornaconto bancario. Amore sviscerato per i negri d'Etiopia. E strangolazione [...] del progetto di legge contro il linciaggio: legge che ai negri d'America avrebbe certamente fatto piacere.<sup>69</sup>

Cecchi was undoubtedly justified in highlighting the political machinations behind America's opposition to racism abroad. The stance adopted by the United States was hypocritical and Cecchi was well attuned to that hypocrisy. Yet, as soon as one accepts Cecchi's critique of the contradictions of American policy one is immediately reminded of Cecchi's own contradictions. Americans who opposed Italy's actions in Ethiopia should also have opposed the mistreatment of blacks in the United States, but should Cecchi's sensitivity to the plight of American blacks not also have led him to oppose Italy's incursion in Ethiopia? If Americans' tolerance of anti-Semitism in the United States was immoral, was Cecchi not similarly immoral for citing this tolerance in order to excuse anti-Semitism in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany? Cognizant of America's moral failings and rhetorical contradictions, Cecchi might have developed a more consistent and coherent approach to questions of racial justice. Instead, he chose to repudiate the American polemic merely in order to reinforce Italian policy, excusing Italy's racism by emphasizing the racism of Italy's accusers.

One cannot and should not deny that Cecchi, Villari, Ebner, Bruni, and other prominent intellectuals of the Fascist era were both sensitive to the oppression of African Americans and outspoken in their opposition to American injustices. One should not forget, however, that they were also apologists for Italian injustices. They refused to apply the same moral principles to their own society as they did to that of the United States, and this duplicity must certainly undercut their otherwise forceful critiques of American racism. As Edward Said declared in his

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<sup>69</sup> Emilio Cecchi, "Razzismo e opportunismo," originally "Razzismo e utilitarismo agli Stati Uniti," *Corriere della Sera*, July 28, 1938, now in *America amara*, 1209. Cecchi was similarly unsympathetic to African-American critiques of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia. See especially "Piccola borghesia negra," originally "I piccoli borghesi del quartiere negro," *La Lettura* 39, no. 2, February 1, 1939, now in *America amara*, 1199-1204. On Cecchi's reaction to American critiques of Italian colonialism, see Charles Burdett, *Journeys through Fascism*, 235. On African-American reactions to Italy's Ethiopian colonization, see Joseph E. Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936-1941* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); William R. Scott, *The Sons of Sheba's Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Nadia Venturini, *Neri e italiani ad Harlem. Gli anni Trenta e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 1990); Giuliano Procacci, *Dalla parte dell'Etiopia. L'aggressione italiana vista dai movimenti anticolonialisti d'Asia, d'Africa, d'America* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1984), 184-251; Ayele Bekerie, "African Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War," in *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*, eds. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 116-133; S. K. B. Asante, "The Afro-American and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis, 1934-1936," *Race and Class* 15 (1973): 167-84; Stefano Luconi, "The Influence of the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict and the Second World War on Italian-American Voters: The Case of Philadelphia," *Immigrants and Minorities* 16, no. 3 (November 1997): 1-18; and Fiorello B. Ventresco, "Italian Americans and the Ethiopian Crisis," *Italian Americana* 6 (1980): 4-27.

1993 Reith Lectures, “representing the collective suffering of your own people, testifying to its travails, reasserting its enduring presence, [and] reinforcing its memory,” are never sufficient goals for intellectual engagement. Rather,

[f]or the intellectual the task [...] is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others. It is inadequate only to affirm that a people was dispossessed, oppressed or slaughtered, denied its rights and its political existence, without at the same time [...] affiliating those horrors with the similar afflictions of other people.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, intellectuals should be expected to condemn the same offenses at home as they do abroad, holding their own nation to the same standards to which they hold all others. It is “[o]ne of the shabbiest of all intellectual gambits [...] to pontificate about abuses in someone else’s society and to excuse exactly the same practices in one’s own,” Said argued, and the work of many of the leading intellectuals under Fascism is largely characterized by this ploy.<sup>71</sup> When Cecchi and Villari used American racism to justify Italian anti-Semitism, or when Ebner recalled the horrors of American chattel slavery to vindicate what he saw as the lesser injustices of Italian colonialism, they undermined the very principles they claimed to uphold. They were eager to denounce the inequities of others but no less eager to excuse the inequities of their own society. Sensitive to the plight of minorities in the United States, they could not or would not recognize the plight of minorities living under Italian rule.

*Impegno nero* was an attempt to counteract such incongruities, to judge oneself as one would judge one’s adversaries, to diagnose one’s own failures in diagnosing the failures of others. Ultimately, then, what separated postwar *impegno nero* and its characteristic engagement with the African-American struggle from the condemnations of American racism that had circulated under Fascism was imaginative sympathy. Accutely sensitive to analogies between the black and the Italian experiences, intellectuals after the war could no longer condemn the United States without recognizing the Italian implications of each and every condemnation. Thus, whereas Fascism had encouraged critiques of American race relations without recognizing that such critiques might also apply to Italy—indeed, had encouraged criticism of the United States in order to preclude, to challenge, and to counter any criticism of Italy—postwar intellectuals found in African-American literature and its denunciation of American racism a spur for a more critical approach to their own culture and society. After all, as Leone Piccioni argued in the introduction to his 1949 collection of *Letteratura dei negri d’America*, Europeans, too, were implicated in the acts of racism described in much African-American literature:

How can we cast the first stone (and there is good reason to hurl stones, and heavy ones at that), we who, in our illustrious European civilization, have witnessed ruthless racial campaigns and ceaseless persecution? These are yet

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<sup>70</sup> Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 44.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

more instances of the blind madness that often grips men, dragging them far from the just and moral path, towards unpredictable depths.

Potremmo noi gettare la prima pietra. ed una pietra certo è da scagliare, e pesante) noi che abbiamo visto nella nostra civilissima Europa spietate campagne razziali, e persecuzioni senza fine? Sono altri esempi della cieca follia che spesso occupa gli uomini trascinandoli lontani dalle vie del diritto e della morale, verso baratri imprevedibili.<sup>72</sup>

Framing his discussion in these terms, Piccioni was demanding from the start that his Italian readers recall to mind their own complicity in racial violence even as they were led to sympathize with African-American victims of oppression and to condemn their white oppressors. In other words, Piccioni aimed to challenge Italy's own racial attitudes by informing Italians of American racism. He underlined this desire, moreover, by lamenting its opposite, expressing his dismay that racists in the United States had continued to mistreat African Americans even after the Second World War, when the consequences of Europe's own racist policies should have made clear to them the perils of their actions. Lamenting that, for the proponents of America's racist status quo, "the wretched European lesson seems to have meant nothing [la sciagurata lezione europea pare non abbia senso]," Piccioni was warning his Italian readers not to fall into the same trap.<sup>73</sup> Americans had failed to learn from Europe's "wretched lesson," but Italians should nonetheless learn from America, Piccioni implied. Drawing on their outrage against the racial injustice movingly depicted in African-American literature, Italians should stamp out the lingering traces of racism in their own country. Ultimately, therefore, Piccioni was instructing his Italian readers to find in the work of black writers in the United States not only a condemnation of American society, but also—and perhaps more significantly—a provocation for reform in Italy. That two-fold approach, that searching examination, at once inwardly and outwardly focused, is the truest sign of *impegno nero*.

Like the *mito dell'America* on which it was modeled, *impegno nero* was characterized by its self-critical hermeneutic, grounded in the belief that every critique of a foreign culture contained, *in nuce*, the seeds of a critique of Italian culture. Through their empathetic and self-reflexive reading of African-American literature, Italian intellectuals developed a transnational rhetoric of *impegno*, espousing the cause of racial equality in the United States and drawing on the African-American struggle in order to redouble their own efforts in the struggle for justice in Italy. Not only did they demonstrate a commitment to domestic and international political causes, in other words; they repeatedly declared those causes to be united by a shared ethic and a common ambition. By calling attention to the similarities between the Italian situation and that which prevailed in the United States, Calvino, Rèpaci, Del Bo, Caproni, Pavese, Vittorini, Piccioni, and others were commenting on—indeed intervening in—the struggle to rebuild Italy after Fascism. In stark contrast to the hypocritical condemnations of American racism developed under Fascism, therefore, the critiques put forward after the Second World War tended to look inward as well as outward, to link Italian and American social reform. Italian intellectuals protested both against the exploitation of blacks in the United States and against the exploitation of the poor in Italy, working to convey their internationalist vision for a more just society to

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<sup>72</sup> Leone Piccioni, *Letteratura dei negri d'America*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

come. Their *impegno*—their effort to remake Italian culture and to guide Italian social reform—was thus an *impegno nero*: it was founded upon, and subtended by, a real investment in the social and cultural ambitions of African Americans. Arguing that racism in the United States resembled economic exploitation in Europe, that violent attacks on African Americans mirrored those on European minorities during the war, that the miseries of black poverty paralleled the miseries of wartime poverty in Italy, and that the militant opposition to injustice central to African-American literature could provide the impetus for a new, engaged Italian culture, Italy's postwar intellectuals renewed their *impegno*, uniting it with their profound commitment to the African-American struggle.

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